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RITUALS & FESTIVALS
Interplay of Culture, Science & Knowledge Systems
2025

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TWO-DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

UNRAVELLING INDIAN RITUALS & FESTIVALS: THE INTERPLAY OF CULTURE, SCIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

10-11 JANUARY, 2025

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Unravelling Indian Rituals & Festivals the Interplay of Culture Science & Knowledge Systems

10-11 January, 2025

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Manifestations of Bhairava: Exploring the Evolution of Saivism through Iconography and Regional Developments

Sanjay S*

Abstract

Śaivism, one of the oldest traditions in Hinduism, venerates lord Śiva as the Supreme Being, and over centuries, has evolved into various branches and practices. Bhairava, a ferocious form of the god, plays a pivotal role within this tradition, embodying aspects of both destruction and protection. This paper aims to demonstrate how different manifestations of Bhairava evolved in different regions, influenced by the specific strands of Śaivism practised in those areas. In Orissa, Ekapāda Bhairava stands out, symbolizing a fusion of Yoga Tantra practices and the local pillar cult. Similarly, Atiriktānga Bhairava appears at sites where Pāśupata Śaivism was dominant, illustrating the threefold aspects of Śaivism metaphorically. Mārtānda Bhairava exemplifies the synthesis of Śiva and Sun worship, with Āgamic and Tantric manuals revealing an inseparable blend of these two deities in religious practices. Meanwhile, Hanu-Bhairava is introduced as an embodiment of syncretism, merging concepts of Vaisnavism with Śiva's omnipresence further emphasizing the adaptability and inclusivity of Hindu theology as a whole. This paper traces the evolution of these Bhairava images as they reflect the dynamic interplay of regional traditions and Śaiva practices. By examining these specific manifestations, it highlights how the development of Bhairava across the Indian subcontinent mirrors the broader evolution of Śaivism itself.

Keywords: *Bhairava, Saivism, Iconography, Religious Studies*

Introduction

Śaivism, one of the most ancient traditions within Hinduism that venerates Lord Śiva as the Supreme Being, has evolved over centuries into various schools of thought and practices. Within this tradition, Bhairava is a significant and formidable form of Śiva, symbolizing both destruction and protection. His theological prominence is most notably articulated in the Śivapurāna (III.8), where he is revered as a powerful deity, particularly in the sacred city of Vāraṇasī, regarded as the spiritual epicentre of Hindu cosmology. In this narrative, Bhairava is primarily associated with the decapitation of Brahmā's fifth head, an act carried out to punish Brahmā's arrogance. Following this event, Bhairava is said to have been afflicted with the sin of *Brahmahatyā* (Brahminicide) and Śiva instructs him to atone for this sin by carrying the severed head and wandering the cosmos, begging for alms. It is only upon his arrival in Vāraṇasī that Bhairava's sin is absolved. The location where the severed head is believed to have fallen is known as Kapāla-mocana-tīrtha, a site still visited by devotees today, who believe it to possess the power to free them from various forms of sin and evil.

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Figure 1: *Bhairava/ Kṣetrapāla, 11-12th Century CE, Cōḻa Period, Thenur, Tamil Nadu*

A common epithet of Bhairava encountered in both Purānic and Āgamic texts is that of *Ksetrapāla*, or the Guardian of the site (Figure 1). In this context, Bhairava in Vāraṇasī is widely referred to as the *Kotwāl*, or the police magistrate of the city (Visuvalingam, 1986). Bhairava's role as a protector is also reflected in texts which enumerates either eight (Agnipurāna, 313.7-12) or sixty-four distinct forms (Rudrayāmala Tantra, ch.1 verse 52-65) of Bhairava. These forms, while described in the texts, exhibit minimal iconographic variation and are seldom depicted in sculpture, instead representing Bhairava's ritual presence across the physical and metaphysical realms of the earth. Another attribute that underscores his role as a protector is his *vāhana* (vehicle), a dog, symbolizing the ancient association of canine creatures with the safeguarding of wealth and property.

While mainstream religious texts may offer various insights into Bhairava like these, certain manifestations of the deity found across the Indian subcontinent are not directly mentioned in either religious or secular texts, nor are they referenced in inscriptions. This paper seeks to examine such lesser-known manifestations of Bhairava, such as:

1. Ekapāda Bhairava
2. Atiriktānga Bhairava
3. Mārtānda Bhairava
4. Hanu-Bhairava.

Ekapāda Bhairava

The terrifying aspects of Śiva played a significant role in the iconographic programs of temples from the 9th to the 14th centuries CE. One distinctive and unusual representation within the Śaiva pantheon is Ekapāda Bhairava, a single-footed deity found primarily in the side niches of temples in Orissa. The origins and evolution of this deity remain somewhat obscure. Orissan depictions of Ekapāda Bhairava typically present the deity with four arms, although smaller images sometimes show him with only two (Donaldson, 1982). His fierce or 'Bhairava' aspect is conveyed through his facial expression and the attributes held in his hands. In images from the 8th to 10th centuries CE, Ekapāda Bhairava is commonly portrayed with a short beard, open mouth, fangs, moustache, and bulging eyes. He stands rigidly on a single, pillar-like foot, is ithyphallic, and wears a tiger skin around his waist. A crescent moon often adorns his matted hair, and he is typically accompanied by attendants on either side (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Ekapāda Bhairava, 8th Centuty CE, Talesvara Temple, Bhubaneswar, Orissa (PC: Thomas Donaldson, 1982)*

After the 10th century CE, depictions of Ekapāda Bhairava in the Orissan region show increasing influence from Śākta Tantra traditions (Behera & Donaldson, 2021). These later images include additional iconographic features such as a *Mundamālā* (garland of skulls) and a *Śava* (corpse) beneath his foot, further emphasizing his terrifying form. In addition to these stylistic changes, specific iconographic alterations are observed. The early attributes, such as the varada mudrā (boon-bestowing gesture) and *kamandalu* (water jar), are replaced in later depictions by the *Damaru* (hourglass-shaped drum) and *kapāla* (skull-cup), reflecting the evolving tantric context of the region (Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Ekapāda Bhairava, 14th Century CE, Kosalesvara Temple, Orissa (PC: Thomas Donaldson, 1982*)

Meaning Behind the Imagery

It is important to note that no definitive explanation has been offered for the significance of Ekapāda Bhairava's form in Orissa. Scholars who have studied the region propose two main arguments. The first suggests that Ekapāda's pose, with the deity standing in pillar-like rigidity on a single foot, symbolizes the immobility of *tapas-yoga* (ascetic meditation), which is a key aspect of Śiva's persona. The association with severe asceticism or penance is further emphasized by the presence of a kneeling or devout attendant, often depicted as one of the deity's companions (Donaldson, 1982).

An alternative argument is that Ekapāda Bhairava's pillar-like form may have been favoured due to its resemblance to the pillar deities like Goddess Stambhesvari worshipped by various tribal communities across Orissa. Therefore, this imagery's incorporation into Śaiva temples may have served as a means of integrating non-temple, indigenous elements into the mainstream religious framework (Williams, 2005).

Atiriktānga Bhairava

The term 'Atiriktānga' is associated with one of the sixty-four forms of Bhairava mentioned in the *Rudrayāmala Tantra*. The term itself translates to "one with an additional or extra limb." In alignment with this meaning, the images of Atiriktānga Bhairava are typically depicted with three legs, one of which is carved either between the two legs or on one side. However, the *Rudrayāmala* itself when mentioning Atiriktānga Bhairava does not describe the deity as having any supernumerary limbs, only stating that he possesses four hands holding Śaiva implements. Individual sculptures of this form have been reported from various regions, including Delhi, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh (Banerji, 1989).

In an 11th-century CE image from the Modhera Sun Temple in Gujarat, the deity is depicted facing east, with three heads, three arms, and three legs (Figure 4). The lower right hand likely held a *khadga* (sword), as indicated by the broken hilt, while the upper right hand holds a distinctive *kattāra* (curved dagger). The solitary left hand bears a *kapāla*. Of the three faces, the two on the sides appear peaceful, while the central face may have been fierce, although it is too worn out to confirm. The deity is adorned in an elaborately decorated lower garment and is surrounded by a host of attendants positioned both above and below him.

Figure 4: *Atiriktānga Bhairava, 11th Century CE, Modhera Sun Temple, Gujarat*

Another three-legged image, from the Madhukesvara Temple at Mukhalingam, Andhra Pradesh, depicts the deity with four arms and a third leg positioned between the two natural ones (Figure 5). The upper right hand holds a paraśu (axe), while the upper left carries a triśūla (trident). Notably, the lower left arm is shown resting on the head of a sage-like figure, while the lower right arm appears broken at the elbow. The deity features a vertically aligned third eye on the forehead and matted hair, which is emulated by the devotees standing below in supplication. The figure is bearded and adorned with elaborate jewellery, while a distinctive halo behind the head underscores his supreme divinity.

Figure 5: *Atiriktānga Bhairava, Madhukesvara Temple at Mukhalingam, Andhra Pradesh (PC: Arundhati Banerji)*

Meaning Behind the Imagery

One interpretation that attempts to explain the philosophical significance of the deity's three legs suggests that this icon may also be referred to as *Tripāda Mūrti*, where *pāda* in Sanskrit can mean both "feet" and "part" depending on the context in which they are used in a sentence. According to the *Linga Purāna* and the *Sarvadarśana Sangraha,* the Śaiva thought system is divided into three fundamental parts: Paśu, Pati, and Pāśa. In this framework, all beings in the universe are considered the flock or paśu, and Śiva, as the Lord of the flock or Paśupati, liberates them from the bonds of pāśa or bondage (Kumari, 2008). This interpretation is supported by the fact that many of the sites housing these unique Bhairava images are historically linked to the Pāśupata school of Śaivism, as evidenced by inscriptions within the site and references in both religious and secular texts.

Mārtānda Bhairava

The term Mārtānda is traditionally associated with the sun god, and its combination with Bhairava suggests, at first glance, a deity that represents an amalgamation of Śiva and Sūrya. Though rare, depictions of this deity can be found in both northern and southern regions of India, including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Tamil Nadu. The earliest images of Mārtānda Bhairava date back to the 11th century CE, with one notable representation found in the Konark Sun Temple, where the deity is depicted eight times.

In these sculptures, Mārtānda Bhairava is portrayed with three heads and six arms, dancing on a boat. In one particular image, all three heads are shown with ferocious expressions, complete with fangs and hair resembling flames. The deity wears a snake as an upavīta (sacred thread) and a kapālamālā that extends down to the thighs. The top left hand holds a cakra (discus), while the lower right hand grasps a khatvānga (staff), with the remaining arms damaged or broken. Inside the boat, a figure is seated, holding an oar and gazing at the deity in awe (Figure 6).

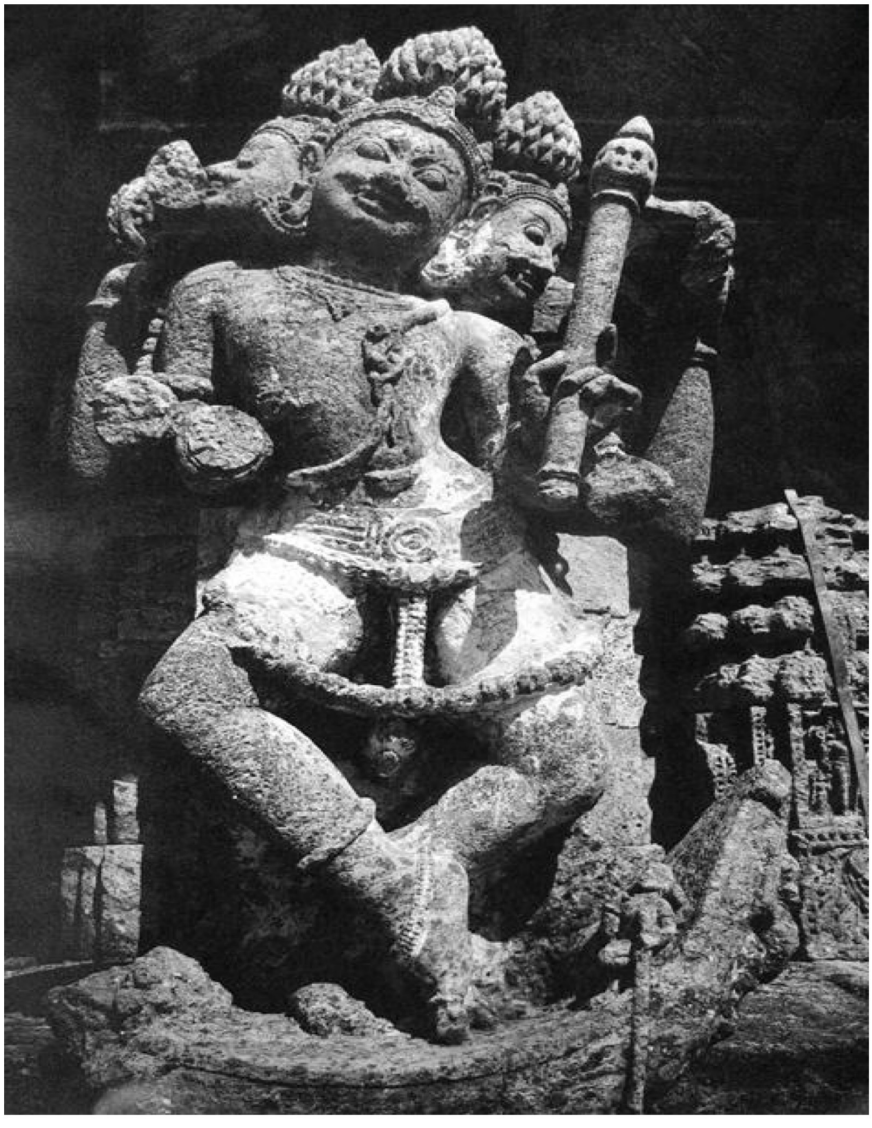

Figure 6: *Mārtāṇḍa Bhairava, 11th Cen CE, Konark Sun Temple, Orissa (PC: Archaeological Survey of India)*

Meaning Behind the Imagery

The Saurakānda of the Hayaśīrsa Pāñcarātrā provides a detailed description of Mārtānda Bhairava, closely aligning with the depictions found in Konark. The text identifies three variations of the deity, differentiated by the number of arms—six, twelve, or sixteen—all of which are shown standing on a boat (Maitra, 1988). The weapons held by the six-armed form in the Saurakānda also correspond to those found in the sculptures of Mārtānda Bhairava at the Konark Sun Temple.

However, the text does not explicitly explain the significance of the deity standing on a boat. As a possible explanation for this feature, one can look at Kashmiri Śaiva traditions, where particularly in the writings of Ksemarāja, the sun is often symbolized as the supreme light of consciousness, ultimately identified with Śiva, the embodiment of supreme consciousness (Bäumer, 2006). Within this context and other tantric traditions, the term sansāra refers to the perpetual cycle of life, death, and rebirth, metaphorically likened to an ocean, whose waves rise and fall endlessly without cessation. The depiction of Mārtānda Bhairava, an amalgamation of the sun and Śiva—both symbolizing the supreme consciousness—standing on a boat may therefore represent the deity transcending the currents of sansāra, signifying his presence outside the cyclical nature of worldly existence.

This interpretation might also explain the figure inside the boat in the Konark sculptures, who appears to be looking up at the deity, possibly seeking guidance or salvation. Although this is a plausible inference, it remains speculative due to the unknown origins of the *Hayaśīrsa Pāñcarātrā* and the uncertain extent to which Kashmiri Śaiva tenets were known and followed in Orissa.

Hanu-Bhairava

Depictions of this particular image of Bhairava are primarily found in painted manuscripts, with the earliest recorded example dating to 1795 CE from a text called Kalāpustaka originating from Nepal, featuring numerous composite imageries of gods and goddesses (Ganeshan, 2014). One such image portrays a ten-armed figure with five faces, the central face resembling a monkey, while the other faces, from left to right, include those of a vulture, a jackal, a boar, and a horse atop the central head. The uppermost left hand holds a mountain, akin to Gandhamādana, a common emblem of Hanumān. The other hands carry weapons of war and destruction, typical of Śaiva iconography. The entire figure radiates intense flames, and although the body appears humanoid, the feet are distinctly primate, resting on two human figures—one prostrate and the other slightly bent. The deity is identified as Hanu-Bhairava only through an inscription accompanying the image in the same folio (Figure 7).

Figure 7: *Hanu-Bhairava from the Kalāpustaka currently housed in the Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi (PC: Ganeshan, 2014)*

Another comparable image, painted in the Guler style but without an identifying inscription, depicts a ten-armed and five-headed figure similar to the previous example. The central face is that of a monkey, while one key difference is the presence of a lion's face in place of the vulture seen in the earlier painting. The deity also holds

Gandhamādana in one of the left hands and is shown standing atop a prostate figure (Figure 8). Compared to the previous depiction, this version of the deity is less ornate, with simpler attire and fewer decorative elements.

Figure 8: *A possible painting of Hanu-Bhairava currently housed in the Chandigarh Museum (PC: Ganeshan, 2014)*

Meaning Behind the Imagery

No textual references explicitly mention the deity Hanu-Bhairava, but there is one mantra (ritual incantation) for a five-headed Hanumān found in the *Sudarśana Sanhitā*, where Garuda himself provides a description. This deity is described as five-headed, ten-armed, and possessing fifteen eyes, to whom prayers are directed to fulfil all desires and goals. The description closely resembles the Nepalese painting, except that one head in the mantra is supposed to be of a man-lion, and the vulture's head is identified as Garuda. Interestingly, at the conclusion of the mantra, the deity is referred to as Rudra-Hanumān (Lutgendorf, 2001).

Another intriguing aspect of this unconventional deity is its possible connection to the Rāmānandis, a Vaisnava Bhakti sect that began settling in Ayodhyā in the 18th century—the same period when the earliest depictions of Hanu-Bhairava appeared. The Rāmānandis, who worship Rāma as the Supreme Being, view Hanumān as an incarnation of Bhairava (Veer, 1987). These paintings and mantras may hence represent an attempt to reconcile the devotional Rāmabhakta Hanumān with the fierce Śaiva deity Bhairava, potentially creating a new syncretic deity that merges Vaisnava motifs with Śaiva concepts.

Conclusion

Several such manifestations of Bhairava hence reflect the complexity of this deity's iconography and regional variations. Despite their presence in temple architecture and religious art from various parts of India, neither religious nor secular texts provide direct explanations regarding the meaning and symbolism of these particular forms. This situation highlights the evolving nature of research in the field of religious iconography where the possibility of new discoveries could shift our understanding. Manuscripts that have remained unpublished or untranslated in libraries across the world could one day shed light on the origins, meanings, and ritual significance of these unique Bhairava imageries. As scholars continue to work on and translate ancient texts,

our understanding of these enigmatic depictions may evolve, revealing new layers of complexity in the ways Bhairava was conceived and worshipped in the past. Until then, the interpretations presented remain speculative, though deeply rooted in the iconographic and philosophical frameworks that are available to us today.

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